

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE  
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## **EACH MADMAN WITH HIS THEME/Cada loco con su tema (1939)** Juan Bustillo Oro

Genre: Comedy

To view: <https://youtu.be/V1vEIXte9MA>

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### OVERVIEW

*Cada loco con su tema* (Each Madman with his / her Own Theme) is a high-energy and highly intelligent farce from the Mexican Golden Cinema (Cine de Oro). As a farce, it entertains the audience its use of exaggeration, absurdity, and over-the-top performances. However, as in most of Bustillo Oro's work, *Cada loco con su tema* uses Expressionistic cinematography and themes from film noir to satirize a genre (pulp horror radio) and to pull in the tradition of the "carpas." The carpas were Mexican (and also Mexican-American) traveling tent shows that traversed Mexico and the southwest United States from the time of the Mexican Revolution, 1910, through the 1940s. The high-energy theatrical spectacles were intended for working-class Spanish-speaking audiences and as such, they often mocked the wealthy classes and the mores of the rich, especially the elites descended from the Spanish who were granted land and privilege during the Spanish colonial times. Thus, they could be, and generally were, anarchic and subversive. The brilliant comedian, Cantinflas, got his start in the carpas, where he perfected his "peladito" character, a cheerful and quick-witted street-smart character who finds himself in absurd situations, often deliberately defying conventions of the upper classes (who are indistinguishable from corrupt politicians and organized crime families).

In *Cada loco con su tema*, there are many levels of mistaken identity and misperceptions due to completely flawed assumptions. The main premise is that a horror-radio show writer with a comical name (Julio César Napoleón ) has driven himself into a state of extreme paranoia by being immersed in crime drama and horror all day, every day. After a nervous breakdown, he is advised to spend a month at a sanatorium operated by his doctor. To avoid possible career repercussions, he takes on an assumed name, Justiniano Conquián , which, coincidentally, is the same name as a mild-mannered and rather befuddled taxidermist who must endure one month in the ancestral family mansion, reputed to be haunted by spirits that drive one mad or to one's death. Justiniano will inherit the full 6 million pesos. The catch is that he has to emerge from the month both alive and sane. It won't be easy. The real Justiniano has the bad luck of having greedy relatives who are eager to push Justiniano into madness or death so that they can have equal shares of the inheritance.

So, with such a premise, there are many opportunities for identity confusion, mix-ups, and comical misperceptions. Most of the action takes place at the ancestral family castle, where Julio César and his assistant, Serafin, end up after taking a wrong turn on their way to the mountain sanatorium. Justiniano's scheming relatives are already installed there. Justiniano arrives a day late, having spent a night at the mountain sanatorium after also taking a wrong turn.

### SYNOPSIS

Horror writer Julio César Napoleón has a nervous breakdown after hearing a performance of his own radio horror show and is sent to a sanatorium. He takes the wrong turn, though, and ends up at an overgrown mansion where a crime is in progress. Julio César doesn't realize the error and thinks that he is at the sanatorium - albeit a very strange one - where the odd insistence of the staff in calling him "Justiniano Conquián" is part of a new treatment regimen. In reality, the "staff" consists of the real Justiniano's relatives who want to murder him so they can inherit his fortune. When the real Justiniano arrives, his relatives think that he is a mental patient, and redouble their efforts to kill Julio César, whom they think is the heir. A relative wearing a gorilla suit is poised murder him, when Julio Cesar is saved by the same weekly radio drama, which has conveniently been set to play at high volume, with its "hands

up!” and the sound of shots being fired. The ruse works, and the murderous relatives are exposed and arrested. The real Justiniano returns home to his taxidermy shop and Julio Cesar proposes to the lovely Josefina, the relative who was trying to save Justiniano rather than murder him.

## THE STORY

**WRITER FEARS** Horror writer Julio César Napoleón unlocks his front door and enters, just to hear an aggressive voice telling him to put up his hands or be shot. He does so, riddled with terror. He continues to be terrorized by the voice until he manages to collect his wits and run out the door, with gunshots following him. Julio is clearly having a nervous breakdown as he paranoidly where the people who want to kill him have gone. Julio César is dressed for a cold winter evening and he gesticulates wildly with his pipe as he speaks. He is convinced that killers are after him.



**DOCTOR COUNSELS** The scene changes as the psychiatrist, Dr. Jiménez, has a heart to heart meeting with Julio César and explains to him that he is being tormented by his own thoughts. He is suffering from acute paranoia and needs to get away. The doctor suggests that Julio César Napoleón leave to go to a sanatorium for an extended stay for rest and recuperation “Are you sending me to a madhouse?” asks Julio César. Dr. Jiménez believes that all mental illness is self-induced by obsession and excess. Julio César Napoleón , as a writer of pulp horror scripts, with their Grand Guignol-style over-the-top emphasis on exaggerations and extremes, started to live his own mental creation. Not surprisingly, he had just finished a script, “Murder in the Madhouse,” and he pointed out, that it is following the script almost perfectly.



**LAWYER READS THE WILL** The two men are an attorney and his assistant who are there to inform Justiniano that he has inherited 6 million pesos from his uncle. However, there is a condition. He has to stay a month in the ancestral haunted castle that lies in the middle of the Dead Man Mountains. Coincidentally, it's located near Dr. Jiménez's sanatorium. The attorney comments that every Conquián that lived in the castle went mad. The Conquián attorney sows seeds of greed as he reads the will of the recently deceased Conquián head of the family. He reads that most of the Conquián family has died in a state of insanity brought on by sheer terror. He does not want the line to continue that way, so he will leave his possessions to only those tough enough to keep their mind and body intact for a month living in the castle, reputed to be haunted by blood-thirsty spirits and possibly a gorilla. Justiniano Conquián, a mild-mannered taxidermist, learns that he will inherit \$6 million pesos if he can manage to survive a month in the Conquián Castle without going insane or dying.



**TAXIDERMIST ARRIVE** Justiniano Conquián arrives at the castle with his characteristic umbrella opened inside the house, and a rather befuddled expression. It is morning and the light makes a contrast with his dark suit and umbrella.





**RELATIVES PLOT: Ghosts, Gorilla, Skeleton** The gorilla terrifies Conquián men to death. They die of horror, their eyes staring ahead, their bodies lying at the feet of the gorilla. The dried out gorilla has strangled at least two people who were found dead at his feet. The large closet contains a secret passage that the gorilla uses to break out and menace the guests. As you can see in the shot, it is not a real gorilla, but a person in a gorilla suit. The gorilla as figure of horror was common in films of this era and included the King Kong series. A series of madcap scenes ensue, with the gorilla continuing to rampage, this time with deadly effect. Two of the heirs are strangled by the gorilla and killed (or at least pretend to be, in order to shock the heir into madness). The gorilla starts to attack again, but Julio César defeats him. He rips off the simian's strangely detachable head to find that Severo's son is underneath it. Severo pulls out a pistol and threatens Julio César. A battle ensues, and Julio César and Serafin prevail. After Severo is caught, Julio César and Seraphin tie everyone together. Serafin is delighted at the successful outcome and Justiniano is relieved that he is, in fact, himself, and also that his scheming relatives will get their just reward – jail. Julio César has a very difficult first night. Terrifying sounds, darkness, and shadows. The driver is dressing to get medicine for his nerves “the damned monkey is driving me mad” – when he sees a skeleton in the bed placed next to Julio César / Don Justiniano. The skeleton was, apparently, Justiniano's grandfather, who was never buried but allowed to be eaten clean by maggots (“how unhygienic!” exclaims Julio César.)



**WRITER'S FEAR IS GONE** Julio César ecstatically communicates to Serafin that he has deduced that yes, this is indeed a “manicomio” (madhouse), but that instead of being terrified, he should recognize that the fear and horror-inducing elements are a part of Dr. Jiménez’s revolutionary new therapy, “Cada loco con su tema” – “Each madman with his theme.” In other words, don’t fight the delusion that your mind has made. Instead, go with it, and take it to its logical denouement. There is nothing to fear, he tells Serafin. It’s just like his script, “Murder in the Madhouse,” with just a few variations. So, he’ll simply go along with the script.



## THEMES

**Existential Isolation / People Live in Bubble Worlds:** As a parody of the “pulp horror” radio shows that emerged in the 1930s and were highly popular for their sensationally dramatic story lines, naturalistic action, and extremely realistic sound effects (screams, gurgles, gunshots, sighs, and more), *Cada loco con su tema* took the standard elements and explore questions: What happens when you think you have lost your sanity? What does the world look like if you choose to treat every disagreeable thing you see as a hallucination? And, finally, how is it that we in the world are, each of us, in our own little bubble world, locked in our own obsessions? *Cada loco con su tema* means literally “every madman with his theme,” which indicates that each person is focused on his or her own theme or obsession. In English, perhaps a more illustrative title which captures the essence of what is going on might be “bubble world.” The psychiatrist who runs a mountain sanatorium has a unique approach: instead of trying to rid the individuals of their delusions or hallucinations, he thinks that the best cure is to let people take the hallucinations even further and to live their lives as if the hallucinations were real. Audience members who may have known people who actually lived their lives in that way realized that this is perhaps the most disastrous notion of all, and yet, the spectacle promised to be quite entertaining.

**“Tent show” influences:** *Cada loco con su tema* incorporates the acting styles and performances from the tent-shows. They can be seen in the physical humor and exaggerated body movements in the acting. For example, when Galvan Conquián presides over the “infernal” formal dinner, he performs campy echoes of Bela Lugosi as Dracula, praying an oration from the Black Mass instead of the Lord’s Prayer, etc. The infernal dinner scene is a perfect example of how performance that echo the tent-shows were deeply subversive. The chiaroscuro lighting, the costumes (highly formal, like a vampire), the food (a pile of ashes, a soup with an alarm clock in the middle), and the rituals (Black Mass), communicate the message that the elites are devil-worshipping psychopaths whose prime goal is to drive ordinary people

insane and to steal their patrimony / inheritance. This is a powerful political commentary, particularly at a time in Mexican history when the promises of the Revolution (democracy, restoration of rights and property, socialistic safety nets) were not being realized.

**Grand Guignol-esque Naturalism:** The Grand-Guignol Theatre was a theatre in Paris that specialized in horrifying spectacles known to make people faint, become sick, and otherwise traumatized. In a way, they can be said to make a mockery of the Greek notion that the efficacy of theatre is in its purifying and emotionally clarifying catharsis. The Grand Guignol productions were extremely popular from the late 19<sup>th</sup> century through 1962 and exercised a tremendous influence on radio, film, and expressionistic experimental theatre such as that of Antonin Artaud (*The Theatre of Cruelty*). The theatre was an outgrowth of literary naturalism as pioneered by Zola, Flaubert, and Proust. The spectacles were highly popular, and prided themselves on giving people extreme experiences – something that found its way into French philosophy as well; for example, in the case of Foucault's quest for "limit experiences." Always a bit disreputable and willing to toy with the frontiers of life and death (they often boasted of having a doctor on call for people who needed medical attention due to the intense shock), the Grand-Guignol Theatre became a kind of "guilty secret." The direct heirs of the horror spectacles were the popular genres in literature and film, which included pulp fiction, horror radio, sensation novels, and horror films. *Cada loco con su tema* is a parody of the Grand-Guignolesque productions, and in subverting the genre, it also calls into question the true impact of art, and the nature of catharsis in theatre.

**Reality is a Deconstruction.** In *Cada loco con su tema* reality is seriously and repeatedly called into question. Perhaps the most powerful message in *Cada loco* is the tacit suggestion that reality is a choice, and not something to be independently verified by empirical observation or sensory perceptions. Because they believe that they are in an asylum and that what they are seeing are simply theatrical productions designed to shock them into their senses, Julio César and Serafin scrunch up their faces, close their eyes, and loudly chant: This is not real! This is not real! The comical aspect is that they are actually closing their eyes to something that is quite real. When Julio César chooses to assume the identity of Justiniano Conquián, he is also choosing his own reality. For the "real" Justiniano Conquián, his befuddlement and tenuous grasp on what is going on around him have the opposite effect. For Justiniano Conquián, reality is not a choice, but a slippery slope that slides just beyond his grasp. Taxidermy further illustrates the "reality dialectic" – the taxidermy specimens are real depictions of a life that is no longer a life. They are dead – except for the supposedly taxidermied gorilla, which turns out to be quite alive (albeit not a taxidermy specimen at all, but a man in a gorilla suit).

**The Hero's Journey:** Julio César Napoleón, his very name a reference to great heroes of history, goes from crisis and mental breakdown, to a journey in a kind of purgatory of doubt, fear, and danger, to finally emerge heroic, where he defeats the monster (a man in a gorilla suit), saves the endangered dame (takes her out of the closet where she has been hiding), and delivers the scoundrel would-be thieves to the police. This journey echoes Joseph Campbell's notions of the hero's journey with one slight hitch: Julio César has been laboring under a complete delusion the entire time, and his courage is based on his own faulty assumption or premise. He has believed that the castle where six people are plotting to kill him is a mental hospital and that the six individuals are mental patients who have been encouraged to role-play their delusions to their fullest. This is actually a powerful message, albeit tremendously subversive: The most heroic among us are courageous because they believe in a version of reality that is, in reality, not real.

## CHARACTERS

Julio César Napoleón	A successful, but very high-strung writer of horror shows for the radio
Justiniano Conquián	A mild-mannered taxidermist who may inherit 6 million pesos
Josefina Larios Conquián	Lovely younger sister of Justiniano
Serafin del Monte	Julio César's assistant
Dr. German Casca Conquián	Distant relative who devises a scheme to cheat Justiniano
Augusta	The butler's wife who foretells doom and gloom
Severo	The butler, and also, secretly a contender to the inheritance
Lucrecia	The scheming wife of one of the contenders to the inheritance
Dr. Luis Jiménez	Psychiatrist who runs a sanatorium based on his personal theories

## CHARACTER ANALYSIS

**Julio César Napoleón :** As the protagonist of the film, Julio César dominates the screen. That is not to say that his character is well-developed or very profound. He is a farcical character at best, and in his role, he entertains with his mistaken perceptions, his over-reactions, and his febrile approach to life. In his case, as a writer of pulp horror scripts, life imitates art, or, perhaps it is more accurate to say that the artifice of his craft exercises a predetermining impact on his life.

*Imaginative:* When Julio César recalls the premise of Dr. Jiménez's premise about the nature of madness and how to cure it, he is able to devise his own imaginative implementation of it. Dr. Jiménez suggests that the way to cure one's delusion is to go all the way with it and take it to its ultimate outcome. Julio César sees a way to do that – he convinces Serafin to also look at everything as though it is real. In "Murder in the Madhouse," six greedy relatives conspire to drive their relative mad so that he will disqualify himself for the inheritance and they will be able to inherit his share. Julio César's imagination serves him well as he decides to outmaneuver the scoundrels.

*Paranoid:* Julio César Napoleón writes cheap, sensational horror radio dramas for a living. That kind of day-in and day-out immersion in the worst of human nature has to take its toll. It should and it does. After Julio César leaves his home, he goes directly to the home of his assistant, Serafin del Monte. He is accompanied by 4 uniformed policemen. He is convinced that someone is trying to kill him, based on the voices shouting at him to put his hands up, and also on the sound of gunfire.

*Reality is what you make it to be:* A theme of the film and one that also aligns with the protagonist is that of reality vs fantasy. Julio César are convinced that they are in Dr. Jiménez's clinic / sanatorium, and that all the people who surround them are mental patients. Each acts in his / her own eccentric way because they are following Dr. Jiménez's notions. Augusta, the gloomy soothsayer of doom, is obsessed with death, and so she takes it even further as she slinks around the castle with wild eyes and lugubrious intonations. Similarly, the person who believes himself to be a gorilla is encouraged to indulge his beliefs and to explore "gorillaness" to extreme lengths. Further, if there is something that you find too overwhelming or terrifying to confront, Julio César simply closes his eyes tight and intones "This does not exist, it does not exist, it does not exist!" immediately raising the issues of reality, and one's own construction of reality.

*Mind Saturated with Horror:* When Julio César comes home from work and mistakes the radio program, "Murder in the Madhouse" for something going on in real life, it seems almost impossible that the author of the radio program would not actually recognize his own work. Comically, he does not, and he believes that people are out to kill him. According to Dr. Jiménez, Julio César has been the architect of his own mental breakdown. He induced his own mental illness by over-saturating his brain in a one-track pursuit of one thing: in this case writing pulp horror scripts for the radio. He's so saturated in horror that he sees the monstrous and the horrific everywhere.

## QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

1.- The opening scene is comical and sets the stage for one of the final scenes in the movie. In the first, a highly excitable writer of pulp horror (a la Grand-Guignol Theatre) does not realize that the radio performance of his own script is not real, and he reacts with fear as he thinks people are out to kill him. In the last, the scheming Severo drops his gun when he hears an episode of the same radio show, blaring on in the castle. What are the implications of this parallel? What do they say about the nature of perception and reality? How do they speak to naturalism?

2.- Julio César Napoleón writes chill-inducing scripts for the radio. Please describe the nature of the pulp horror he produces. Please describe the plot of "Murder in the Madhouse" and how he describes how it follows perfectly the plotline of what was really happening with Justiniano Conquián and his relatives. What did he mean by the fact that the doctor left the gorilla and a few other extra-script items to be produced by the imagination of the audience and/or the players?

3.- There is a great tension between what is real and what is not real in *Cada loco con su tema*. Please list the items in the script that are real. Then, list the ones that people think are real, but are not real. For example, there is a "real" Justiniano and then there is the "pseudonymous" Justiniano. Julio Cesar thinks



that the radio broadcast is real, but it is not. Later, he believes that the castle is the sanatorium, but it is not. What are the implications, and why are the mix-ups funny?

4.- Describe the taxidermy studio of Justiano Corquian. Then, compare and contrast it with the gallery of taxidermy specimens in the castle. How does each make a commentary on the nature of reality and the living? What does the presence of the gorilla do to the worldview that would put ideal specimens that are to gaze upon as perfection, but not to interact with? Both Josephine and the gorilla enter and exit through the closet with the secret passageway? How might this be a commentary about female sexuality?

5.- The dinner scene involves an elaborate reversal of what one would expect in a formal dinner with the elite class. In fact, it is staged as an elaborate ritual to worship Satan. In doing so, the film creates an extended metaphor about the elite class in Mexico and suggests that they are not what they seem; instead they are diabolical devil-worshippers who steal from the bumbling, the innocent, and the defenseless. Please describe specific aspects of the dinner and how each aspect subverts the social order. Why might this have been a rather controversial critique at that point in time in Mexico's history?